THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

BLESSED ARE THE DOUBTERS

January 24, 1999
John M. Buchanan

Each time an unexpected discovery is made in the world of knowledge, it shakes the religious establishment of the day. Now, we are often taught that it is unfaithful to question traditions/religious beliefs, but I believe that we must question them continually—not God, not Christ, who are at the center of our lives as believers and creators—but what human beings say about God and about Christ; otherwise we truly become God's frozen people. . . . The great artists keep us from frozenness, from smugness, from thinking that the truth is in us, rather than in God. They help us to know that we are often closer to God in our doubts than in our certainties, that it is all right to be like the small child who constantly asks: Why? Why? Why?

Madeleine L'Engle
Walking on Water

FOURTH
PRESBY
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CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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BLESSED ARE THE DOUBTERS
JANUARY 24, 1999
JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Daniel 3:13-18
Mark 9:14-27
"I believe; help my unbelief!"
Mark 9:24

Dear God, If the requirements to get in this morning included moral perfection or theological certainty, not many of us would be here. We come to worship you out of our need for forgiveness and acceptance. We come because we don't have the answers, sometimes only the questions. We come in hope and expectation and trust that somehow your love for us can overcome our moral failure and our religious uncertainty, and even our doubts. So, startle us, O God, with your truth and open our hearts and our minds to your word. In Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

He is, I have always thought, one of the most compelling characters in the Bible, this man who brings his sick son to Jesus. What he says on the occasion, I have always thought, is one of the most relevant and perhaps frequently uttered prayers by modern Christians, "I believe; Lord, help my unbelief."

In the motion picture *Life is Beautiful*, a story in many ways similar to this one is told. The first part of the movie, which takes place in Fascist Italy during World War II, is about Guido, an antic, amusing young man seeking his fortune and future, who falls helplessly and sometimes ridiculously in love. He marries his princess, and they have a son. Guido is Jewish. One day, after the Germans have occupied Italy, he and his six-year-old son are taken away from their bookstore and shipped to a concentration camp. It is the little boy's birthday. His father begins to weave an incredible fantasy, the purpose of which will be not merely to disguise the ghastly reality of what is happening, but ultimately to save his son's life. It's actually all an elaborate game. His father has made reservations on the special train, which consists of cattle cars. At the camp, everyone gets to wear funny uniforms, and everyone is competing to win a prize. The prison guards are there to prevent them from winning. The little boy must hide all day in the barracks, must never be seen or heard, must never ask for more food or snacks. In the final, dramatic scene, as the U.S. Army approaches and the war is over and the S.S. Guards are frantically destroying the evidence of the Holocaust, Guido comes up with one last dramatic ploy—the end of the game which will result in his son's freedom.

It is a wonderful movie, and Guido reminds me of the father in the story who will do whatever it takes, say whatever it takes, to save his son's life and who brings him to Jesus.

One day, in the midst of an ongoing debate between the followers of Jesus and the religious authorities, a man steps out of the crowd, interrupts the discourse, and announces that he has brought his sick son. Apparently, the disciples have already tried to heal him and have failed. The little boy has a major physical challenge. He appears to have epilepsy, a condition which in the ancient world was frightening because of its violent and unpredictable symptoms, which were so mysterious and so terrifying that it was generally

believed that the person was possessed by a demon. Apart from understanding and treatment, epilepsy is a heartbreaking condition. Most of the time, he is fine; a beautiful, energetic little boy, running and playing and talking and asking questions non-stop. And then, without warning, his beautiful face contorts, his eyes roll back, he falls down, and he can't seem to speak or hear. He grinds his teeth almost violently and foams at the mouth. People are terrified and his friends run away; then, later, children, being children, tease him about it and mimic his seizures. It is humiliating. It's also dangerous; he has often hurt himself during one of his seizures. His parents have done everything they can think of, talked to everyone who knew anything or thought they did, tried every prescription. And, as parents in any age who have responsibility for a chronically-ill child, they look to the future with a great deal of wariness and dread. Someday, he'll be on his own, without them to protect him and take care of him. So, they wait and watch for anyone who has a new idea, a new approach.

That's what the man was doing there that day. It doesn't say so, but I think he's feeling very vulnerable and not a little foolish. He doesn't like to beg anyone for help, and he's not at all comfortable with religious fanatics and faith healers and would-be messiahs. In fact, his inherent intelligence and careful thoughtfulness are often in conflict with his desperation to help his son live. He doesn't like this business of coming to a young, charismatic rabbi from Nazareth.

> "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so."

And at that very moment, it happened again. The little boy had a seizure and fell down. And his father is surely cradling him when he says, "If you are able to do anything, have pity and help us."

Jesus responds, "Anything is possible for the one who believes." And now, the man begins to weep; he and his faith and his love and his desperate hope for his son are now the focus. "All things are possible if you believe," Jesus has said.

So there he is, loving his little son enough to walk through the fires of hell for him, enough to die for him, and it turns out that his son's life depends not on his bravery, but on his faith. And so, for the love of his son, he blurts out the most honest confession I've ever heard: "I believe; help my unbelief."

That touches my heart. I'm a father. It touches that place in each of us where we love desperately, love enough to give life itself for the child, the woman, the man; but also the place where we know the limits of our love; where we know that sometimes we can't give life-healing wholeness, save life; can't make it all right. "I believe; help my unbelief."

Theologian Douglas John Hall writes, "No Biblical verse is more existentially meaningful . . . than this prayer, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief." (*Thinking the Faith*, p. 250).

We post-moderns, as a matter of fact, seem to be suspended ~~somewhere between~~ belief and unbelief, faith and doubt. Part of us continues to want a religion that is rational and

provides us answers to life's most difficult questions, and part of us rebels whenever religion tries to tell us too much.

Our situation is characterized by Peter Gomes, preaching in Memorial Church at Harvard. "Many of you have learned to make sense out of religion," he said. "Instruction is what we are about, and we would be tutored in matters of religion as in a foreign language until that blissful day when we will know what the Virgin was not, exactly what happened on Easter Day, and what was the ultimate plan behind the plan of creation" (*Sermons*, p. 217).

The problem is that life doesn't always fit into neat, intellectual categories. Life is full of surprises—irrational happenings, wonderful and sometimes not-so-wonderful accidents, unexpected, unplanned-for love, ecstasy, beauty, sickness, death. Sometimes it doesn't fit together, and a religion that aims for the bliss of no doubts, no questions, no unresolved dilemmas is not going to be very honest, nor very adequate.

So, post-modern men and women like you and me live with both belief and unbelief. John Updike, who continues to take the spiritual pulse of our age, describes our religious dilemma in his novel *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, which is a description of the American religious experience in the 20th Century. The Reverend Clarence Willmott, pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Patterson, New Jersey at the beginning of the Century, loses his faith, his voice, his job, and ultimately his life. Willmott, after struggling with doubt, finally surrenders to unbelief:

> "What he had long suspected, that the universe was utterly indifferent to his state of mind and as empty of divine content as a corroded kettle. All its metaphysical content had leaked away, but for cruelty and death, which without the hypothesis of God became unmetaphysical and simply facts." (p. 7).

Our problem is that we are products of a time in Western history when human confidence has never been higher—intellectual confidence, confidence that all things can ultimately be known and understood, confidence that the human intellect can be trusted to be the final arbiter of reality. If you can observe it objectively; weigh, measure, describe it, prove it; it's real; if you can't, it isn't.

In that climate, religion becomes ideas about God. Faith becomes a collection of doctrine. Belief means understanding and accepting as true, concepts, theses, propositions. In this climate, there is no room for doubt. In this climate, doubt is evidence of inadequate or weak faith.

And what happens, observers of our culture tell us, is that people who find that they continue to doubt conclude that religion is not for them; that the continuing presence of doubt, the continuing struggle with difficult questions and quandaries, places them outside the faith community. Perhaps that's true, to a degree, of you. Perhaps you want to feel as if you are part of the faith community, but can't will away your doubts. Perhaps you are a member, but wonder if you should be because you think having faith means having everything sorted out, resolved, and having sure answers to all of life's tough questions—and you surely don't. Perhaps your definition of faith is theological certainty, and, in that you don't have much, you conclude that you don't have faith.

It is, in fact, a bad definition of faith with which we are operating here; a disastrous definition, a definition characterized by that crusty old Maine farmer, who said, "Faith means believing what you know ain't so."

As a matter of fact, I would propose that doubt is part of an honest faith; that faith without doubt is either dishonest or dead. I take for my model the compelling man who confesses, "I believe; help my unbelief."

Doubt, after all, is a mostly useful dynamic. Rollo May wrote, "The most creative people neither ignore doubt nor are paralyzed by it, and act despite it. Commitment is healthiest when it is not without doubt, but in spite of doubt." I love something the poet Rilke said once, "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and learn to love the questions themselves." (see William Sloane Coffin, *Courage and Love*, p. 7).

Scientifically, doubt and skepticism are part of the process of new discovery. The history of medicine is the story of men and women strong enough to doubt conventional wisdom, often times in the face of fierce opposition from religious authorities. Transfusions, antibiotics, vaccinations, surgery—all of it grew out of the courage of a few individuals to challenge conventional wisdom, *i.e.*, what the world was absolutely sure it knew. Madeline T. Engle reminds us that, "every time an unexpected discovery is made in the world of knowledge, it shakes the religious establishment of the day."

Something happens to religion that has no room for doubt; something not very pleasant, nor, in my opinion, faithful. It becomes exclusive. It begins to focus on keeping out those who don't measure up. It invests its energy building walls, not bridges. It becomes timid, introverted, and irrelevant. The philosopher Pascal quipped, "I am astonished at the boldness with which men undertake to speak of God." And Presbyterian theologian William Placher reminds us that an important part of our Reformed theological tradition is that God, even in revelation, remains hidden, mysterious; that, as St. Augustine noted, centuries ago, "If you understand, it is not God." Martin Luther named it the "hiddeness of God," and taught that faith is the acceptance of insecurity, living in trust of a God who remains a mystery. Placher guesses that Luther would call the doubters the most authentic believers." (*The Domestication of Transcendence*, p. 51).

What the man who brought his son to Jesus had was not intellectual certainty. He did not have his personal theological statement in hand. He brushed right by the theological questions that stop us in our tracks and cause us to build walls of orthodoxy around our religious institutions. He did not declare his belief in the Trinity or the blood atonement of Jesus or the doctrine of divine election. He didn't fall on his knees and recite a creed, rather, he did recite his most personal, most honest creed. He brought to Jesus what he had: his belief and his unbelief and a heart full of love for his son, and it was enough.

"Faith," Douglas John Hall says, "is a category of relationship and a fundamental trust. Faith is what occurs from the human side, when we know ourselves to be encountered, judged, and accepted by the gracious God."

That's exactly what happened to that man when he came to Jesus—a personal confrontation that evoked his trust. Something like that is necessary for the recovery of the churches in our time. As mainline Christianity continues to lose members, the temptation is to tighten

our belts theologically, to turn up the volume and, like tourists, in a country other than their own trying to make themselves understood in a different language by speaking louder, we affirm our faith ever more aggressively and loudly and exclusively. In fact, we need, I believe, to revise our direction 180 degrees. We need to confess that we do not have all the answers, that we trust God with our lives and our future and join the human search for truth—which always involves doubt. We need, I believe, to welcome the doubter, the uncertain, the one who cannot quite get all the words of the creed out.

Faith, I believe, is acting in spite of uncertainty; trusting God in spite of our doubts.

There is a wonderful incident in the middle of one of the oldest Bible stories that helps me understand what true faith is. It's also one of the Bible stories featured in a wonderful new series of videos, which present the narrative by way of a cast of charming vegetable characters—tomatoes, carrots, celery. In this one, the infamous golden statue is a huge, chocolate bunny. It's a story we learned as children. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—I used to love to pronounce those names, and I still do. They are Jewish princes who are about to be thrown into a fiery furnace for refusing to bow down before a golden statue built by the King, Nebuchadnezzar. The way the story is ordinarily told, the three heroes courageously refuse to obey the King and are thrown into the furnace, and, because of their faithfulness, are saved. But there is a little anecdote in the middle of the dialogue that intrigues me and fundamentally changes the dynamic. It's so small, you almost miss it. The three have been given a final ultimatum: bow or burn. Listen to what they say:

> "If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up."

"But, if not . . . ." Did you hear it? Did you hear the honest uncertainty, the doubt? They weren't sure at all that God would intercede. They didn't know how it was going to come out. Faith is not knowing how God will act and what the final chapter in the story is going to be. Faith is the willingness to risk, to trust God, and to walk into the future, even when it is a fiery furnace, trusting in God's goodness and grace.

I love the way John Bunyon puts it:

> "I am for going on, and venturing my eternal state with Christ, whether I have comfort here or no. If God doth not come in, thought I, I will leap off the ladder even blindfold into Eternitie, sink or swim, come heaven or hell. Lord Jesus, if thou wilt catch me, do. If not, I will venture for thy name."

"I believe; help my unbelief." I hear in that brave cry the voice of every one of us.

And I hear in the words of Jesus, "All things can be done for the one who believes," an invitation to bring to him whatever we have of faith and belief and theological correctness and satisfactory answers to life's most vexing questions; to come with our lives, with our love for our dearest, and our sometimes desperate longing for their healing and wholeness and health; an invitation to come with your hopes and fears about yourself, your life, your

relationships, your vocation, your aging, your death; to bring whatever you have into his presence—your belief, and most importantly, your doubts, your unbelief.

The promise is that God is trustworthy—God is faithful. Whatever becomes of us, God can be counted on to love us, forgive us, accept us, and welcome us home.

Wendell Berry, in one of his *Sabbath* poems, writes:

> "The mind that comes to rest is tended
> In ways that it cannot intend.
> Is borne, preserved, and comprehended
> By what it cannot comprehend."
> (*Sabbaths*, p. 7-8)

"I believe; help my unbelief."

"Just as I am, though tossed about,
With many a conflict, many a doubt,
Fightings and fears within, without
O Lamb of God, I come, I come."

Amen.